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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NICOSIA 001002

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE, EUR/SCE, EUR/RUS

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SUBJECT: FM LAVROV DELIVERS SUPPORT FROM MOSCOW

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Classified By: Ambassador Ronald L. Schlicher, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Greek Cypriot opinion leaders characterized Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's December 9-10 visit to the island as "Russia Riding to the Rescue." Lavrov's timing was impeccable, and seemingly too providential (for the G/C cause) to be coincidental. He arrived shortly before two key debates: the UN Security Council discussing renewal of the UN Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) and the Secretary General's locally-controversial December UNFICYP report, and EU ministers and heads of state/government tackling Kosovo final status. Mainstream media and pro-government politicians subsequently would claim Lavrov helped deliver victory in both, with the administration milking the results for maximum electoral gain. Russian interventions in New York had defeated the "Anglo-American attempt to interject unfair political criteria" into the UNFICYP debate and ensured passage of UNSCR favorable to Greek Cypriots, the newspapers trumpeted. Along similar lines, Lavrov's widely-covered comments on the dangerous, precedent-setting nature of a Kosovo unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) had bolstered Nicosia's arguments in Brussels, and perhaps convinced member-state fence-sitters to oppose a UDI. More thoughtful commentators and third-country diplomats questioned what "quo" Cyprus had offered for Russia's "quid," since Lavrov's message throughout had delighted even the hardest G/C hard-liners. Similarly worried, UNFICYP contacts fretted that a developing Nicosia-Moscow "axis" boded poorly for Cyprus Problem negotiations. END SUMMARY.

Long in the Works, but Timing TBD

12. (C) Scuttlebutt here regarding a pending Lavrov visit surfaced in the fall, growing in volume after GoR Special Cyprus Coordinator Leonid Abramov visited the island November 17-18. Russian Embassy DCM Alexander Shcherbakov informed us November 21 that Abramov had traveled to Cyprus "to prepare the ground" for the Minister's visit, tentatively scheduled for December 10-12. Lavrov had no specific purpose in coming to Cyprus other than to reciprocate for then-Cypriot FM George Lillikas's February trip to Moscow, Shcherbakov asserted. He expected "the usual:" calls on President Tassos Papadopoulos, House President Dimitris Christofias, and FM Erato Marcoullis. As Cyprus, not his embassy, was crafting the schedule, he expected Lavrov would remain south of the Green Line and see no Turkish Cypriots officially. Shcherbakov acknowledged the potential electoral

repercussions of organizing a high-level visit while Cyprus's presidential campaign was hitting full stride. "It's unavoidable, however," was his justification.

Mostly Music to G/C Ears

¶3. (SBU) Lavrov evidently shortened his visit to allow attendance at a Russia-EU Dialogue meeting in Brussels (Reftel). Arriving December 9, he conducted the planned meetings and also took time to bestow the "Pushkin Medal" on the Russian-educated Christofias and a former Cypriot minister. His press conferences following the Papadopoulos and Marcoullis meetings generated most of the press play, however. Lavrov first took aim the December UNFICYP report, whose "pro-Turk" contents had spawned greater-than-normal angst amongst Greek Cypriots. On Paragraph 45, which stated "...the upcoming year may prove to be crucial in the search for a comprehensive settlement," Lavrov blasted Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon for attempting to impose timetables on the negotiation. No such timetables would grace the UNSCR that eventually endorsed the report, he promised. Referring to Russia's stance on the Cyprus Problem, Lavrov parroted the oft-repeated Greek Cypriot maxim that any solution must be "viable, workable, and based on a body of prior UNSCRs."

¶4. (U) With Troika talks having concluded the same day and with Kosovo garnering great coverage here, media sought Lavrov's position on final status. The Russian was careful not to proffer a direct Kosovo-Cyprus comparison (although the press took that liberty in interpreting his remarks later). Asked to reveal Russia's likely reaction to a Kosovo UDI and other nations' responses to it, the Minister remarked that countries recognizing Kosovo would violate international law and set off a chain reaction in the Balkans and elsewhere. "The West should think long and hard before taking this route," he concluded.

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¶5. (SBU) Subsequent days' headlines screamed "A Setback for the Anglo-Americans" and "Russia to the Rescue;" reportedly the government was "completely satisfied" by Lavrov's visit. No longer would Britain and the United States exercise exclusive control over Cyprus Problem negotiations, now that Moscow, a permanent Security Council member, was exerting its influence. Self-congratulatory back-patting increased with news of "victory" in New York; the latest UNSCR did not welcome the unpleasant UNFICYP report, but rather only sections of it. Additional good news came from Brussels, with tougher-than-expected Council conclusions criticizing Turkey, and with no member-state consensus emerging over recognition of Kosovo's independence. Such outcomes proved that President Papadopoulos's hard-line policies were delivering successes, the pro-government press reported, and disproved allegations of Cyprus's worsening reputation and growing isolation in international fora.

But At What Price?

¶6. (C) Papadopoulos detractors, both media and political, soon began asking what Cyprus had offered to cement this asymmetric friendship between an island and a superstate. Most alleged a simplistic "Kosovo for Cyprus" arrangement, in which Nicosia committed to opposing recognition of a Kosovo UDI within EU fora -- much to Russia and Serbia's liking -- while Russia promised to protect Greek Cypriots' interests in the Security Council. More serious critics questioned whether doing Russia's bidding in Brussels amounted to abandoning Cyprus's true allies and interests, which lay firmly in the West, not the East. Cyprus risked becoming Moscow's "EU satellite," certain to bring a harsh reaction from fellow member-states.

¶7. (C) In a de-brief December 13, Shcherbakov dismissed talk of an axis or arrangement between the two nations. Also false -- "pure conspiracy theory" -- were allegations that Lavrov had timed his visit specifically to offer Cyprus and/or Papadopoulos a lifeline. Shared interests explained the shared positions of Moscow and Nicosia on Kosovo and the Cyprus Problem, he insisted. Both opposed separatism, whether in Kosovo or elsewhere. Both favored political solutions enjoying blessing from all sides to the dispute. And both Russia and Cyprus opposed arbitration, "suffocating timetables," and internationally-imposed settlements. Such commonality of interests ensured constructive discussion on other matters tackled during the visit, Shcherbakov added, from Russia-Cyprus law enforcement cooperation to visa policy.

¶8. (C) Foreign Ministry official Maria Michael confirmed December 12 that Cyprus and Russia had made progress on the bilateral agenda during FM Lavrov's visit. In addition to legal and consular matters, the sides also reached agreement on unspecified technical and economic agreements. The significance of Lavrov's visit lay in his comments regarding the Cyprus Problem, however. His pro-Greek Cypriot stance in the MFA press conference had surprised even Cypriot counterpart Marcoullis. "We couldn't have drafted better talking points," Michael chuckled. Like Shcherbakov, she disparaged rumors of a mutual back-scratching arrangement between the nations. "We see things the same way in Kosovo and on the island," she concluded.

¶9. (C) Ban Ki-Moon's Cyprus report could have damaged Cypriot interests gravely, asserted Greek Embassy DCM Nicholas Garilides December 13. The UNFICYP document invited countries to upgrade relations with the Turkish Cypriot entity to a level just below official recognition -- "just like Taiwan." It therefore was predictable the RoC would trot out its biggest guns in defense. Whether or not the visit's original focus was bilateral issues, Papadopoulos and Marcoullis had had no choice but to lobby Lavrov hard regarding the Cyprus Problem and Kosovo. It was not difficult for Moscow to say "yes" to the request, Garilides reasoned. Russia already backed the G/C position, and by stating it so clearly, had won the RoC's gratitude. "A small investment for a big payout -- Cyprus's help in Brussels, on Kosovo and other matters." In playing the Russia card, however, Cyprus had taken a step bound to draw larger EU member-states' ire and leave it isolated. "I would not want to be in their position," Garilides reflected.

And to the Detriment of CyProb Negotiations?

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¶10. (C) Lavrov's aggressive tone and solidly pro-G/C message had startled UNFICYP Senior Adviser Wlodek Cibor, especially considering that Russian Ambassador Andrei Nestrenko normally adopted reasonable, balanced positions in Nicosia P-5 representatives' meetings. Lavrov had opened their December 10 call by brandishing a copy of Papadopoulos's latest proposal to jump-start the moribund July 8 Process negotiations, Cibor revealed on December 13, and questioning why Ban's report had not praised the G/C leader's efforts. Lobbing G/C buzzwords liberally -- "settlers," "pseudostate," and "so-called isolation" being three -- Lavrov laid blame squarely on Turkey for the stall in negotiations. "And why was it imperative to reach a solution in 2008?" the Russian demanded, alluding again to the Ban report. "Why not 2009 or 2010?"

¶11. (C) The meeting with Lavrov reminded Cibor of get-togethers with Papadopoulos and his fellow G/C hard-liners. Had the Greek Cypriots succeeded in obtaining Russia's blind support on the Cyprus Problem, perhaps in exchange for backing in Brussels? If so, chances for significant movement in settlement talks seemed scant, since

the G/Cs would take extreme positions knowing that Moscow had their backs.

Comment:

¶12. (C) It is immaterial whether Cyprus and Russia established a formal arrangement during the Lavrov visit to support each other's respective interests in European Union and United Nations fora; for the short-term, their positions on Kosovo and the Cyprus Problem are in synch, albeit for different reasons. We would hope that Cyprus's sharpest strategic minds are weighing the long-term pros and cons of a virtual alliance guaranteed to raise EU member-state suspicions and complicate consensus-building in Brussels, however. But for the time being, it's party hats and Dom Perignon at the Presidency and MFA, with officials celebrating a diplomatic victory over the vilified "Anglo-Americans." Papadopoulos benefited greatly from Lavrov's visit, and it's no great leap to assume he stage-managed the timing and optics for maximum bounce. Recent months had seen his polling in decline, due partly to a string of foreign policy setbacks. But in the last seven days, he has delivered -- or at least created the impression of delivering, through media hyping of the normal give-and-take of the UNSCR rollover exercise -- success on both the EU and UN fronts, and won endorsement from Nicosia's closest CyProb ally, Russia. The next round of polls will emerge in early January, and we expect the President's numbers to level out or even inch up as a result.
SCHLICHER